Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 11 Number 2 February 2014

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 9th February 2014: ICRISAT, 7.00AM.

This visit will be aimed at achieving twin objectives: the regular field visit, as well as the Asian Waterfowl Census exercise. Therefore, the visit will begin with a briefing by Humayun Taher on various aspects pertaining to bird counting, followed by a bird-walk around the Park. Spread out over 90 acres, the park, abutting the Hussain Sagar Lake in the heart of the city, is a great spot for birding. In addition to the resident species like the Orioles, Sunbirds, Drongos, Asian Pied Starlings, etc, we should also get to see a good number of migrants. The lakeshore should also offer a good variety of waders. Please carry binoculars, field guides and notebooks to make a note of the species seen and the numbers counted. This will be a half-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

EARTHFLIGHT Episode 6: FLYING HIGH
Wednesday, 18th February 2014, 6.00PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500 034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

A British nature documentary, Earthflight is a six-part voyage of discovery, spanning six continents and covering some of the world's greatest natural spectacles from a 'bird's-eye view'. Narrated by actor David Tennant, it captures some of the world's most extraordinary natural wonders through the eyes of birds. It is, to put it simply, breathtaking.

To fly like a bird, Earthflight not only captured remarkable images of wild flocks but also relied on some extraordinary relationships between people and birds. Filmed over four years, in six continents and more than 40 countries, the Earthflight team used many extraordinary techniques. For some of the unique flying shots, members of the team became part of the flock. The birds followed wherever they went - even in a microlight over Edinburgh and London. In Africa, paragliders floated alongside wild vultures, while a model vulture carried a camera inside the flock. In South America, wild-living macaws, that were rescued as babies, still come back to visit their 'foster mother' as he travels along a jungle river. In Africa, a radio-controlled 'drone' silently infiltrates masses of pink flamingos without disturbing a feather, and microlights and helicopters capture the dramatic moment white storks arrive over Istanbul. In Africa a tame vulture carried a camera across the African bush and recreated the behaviour of his wild relatives.

Similarly, in the USA, a flock of hand-reared snow geese followed the migration route of wild flocks and took in the sights and sounds of New York - managing to get lost in Brooklyn.

Trip Report – Osman Sagar, 5th January 2014

Bala CS Dasari

Since the return of the flamingos to this part of the world, Osman Sagar has become a choice destination for birdwatchers and nature lovers alike. I have been seeing beautiful images of these graceful birds posted by the members of BSAP in the past year. Hence, when this trip was announced (as part of the Asian Waterfowl Census), I was so excited that I reached the meeting point half an hour ahead of the scheduled time and waited for the others to arrive.

I had never participated in the Asian Waterfowl Census before and I was curious and excited and hoped I could provide valuable inputs. I thought four cars and two bikes, totalling 18 people is probably the optimum way to maintain a reasonably low carbon footprint. The smaller the group, the better and the more fruitful is the interaction. A few of us met at Panjagutta and others joined us near NMDC before we proceeded to Osman Sagar. As we drove through the still foggy morning, the visibility was good enough to spot birds but not enough to identify them. At the first sight of the lake, we stopped and scouted for birds when a Eurasian Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) soared close to us and then disappeared into the fog. After counting the silhouettes of Ibises we decided to move on.

Our next stop was Miyakhan Gadda. Jerdon's Bushlarks (*Mirafra affinis*) and Singing Bushlarks (*Mirafra cantillans*) were busy pecking at food as we drove by. And then the flamingos flew right towards us and circled above us a couple of times, giving us ample time to take pictures as well as count them. The pink tinge across the sky was a pleasant sight to soak in and we counted about 90 of these birds. The rest of the day, we traversed the various banks of Osman Sagar, but the flamingos eluded us successfully after the initial glimpse. We progressed in our count with Little Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius dubius*) and Common Sandpipers (*Actitis hypoleucos*) in good numbers.

We decided to move on to another location with a hope of finding flamingos again and reached Mirzaguda. The drive through the village brought on some curious looks. It seemed to me as though the village was gearing up for a ceremony of sorts which prompted us to plan for a Biryani lunch on the way back. We spotted a few Common Hoopoes (*Upupa epops*) and Yellow-wattled Lapwings (*Vanellus malabaricus*). After driving further up, we stopped for breakfast and the feast began. I think breakfast has evolved into an elaborate event with everyone contributing to the buffet. This trip's breakfast was a feast of predominantly southern cuisine which everyone started digging into. It lasted a good while, with so much variety of food laid out on the makeshift table of Humayun's car bonnet!

Post breakfast, lots of birds on either side of the road made us stop and we found Black-tailed Godwits (*Limosa limosa*), Northern Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*) and a good number of waders. The experienced did the counting while the others were busy trying to identify the birds. A lot of birds were sitting far away on the other side of the bank. And on the same side, a Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax*) was basking in the sun impervious to our presence and giving the photographers a grandstand view.

As we approached the water body, the first bird to greet us was a Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*) circling high above. A few River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) were riding the waves. A walk further revealed Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) and Common Coots (*Fulica atra*) in large numbers. Shafaat Sir enlightened us on the process of rehabilitation of Olive Ridley Turtles and the ensuing discussion touched upon how man was the only plunderer of nature.

We were then joined by a large herd of cows that came to drink water but stopped in their tracks because our presence was blocking their way. The standoff lasted a good while and we decided to move away from the banks to ease their suffering and allow them a smooth passage to the water.

Someone spotted a raptor perched on a tree on the far side of the lake and after much deliberation and eye-straining through the scope, Humayun identified the bird as a Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) much to the disappointment of the few gathered around. That was the last significant birding act of the day and we left the lake to the cows and headed home, already wondering where our next birding trip would be.

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The Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Census - 2014

Humayun Taher

In a way, this is one of the most long-running projects ever undertaken by the BSAP or any other regional wildlife institution in the sub-continent. Since inception in 1987, the Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Census (AWC) has been running without a break throughout the sub-continent. Of course, there have been years of low coverage and low figures, but on the whole it has been a highly successful enterprise for all of its 27 years. And in true BSAP tradition, it is one of the highlights of the year: when the members gird their loins and sally forth to do battle with the wintering waterfowl on the numerous lakes, ponds and marshes that dot the countryside.

Hyderabad city was reputed to have over 5000 lakes. The present number is said to be over 2000, though how many of these still survive is something I would rather not get into. Having said that, there are considerable number of lakes throughout the state where the AWC has been going on regularly for many years now. Some of these sites are of importance in terms of the number of species found there; others gain importance because of maybe one or two vulnerable species being seen regularly here; yet others are important because they are not getting the requisite degree of protection to which they appear to be entitled. The parent body of the AWC is the Asian Wetlands Bureau (AWB), or Wetlands International, as it is known now. In conjunction with the BNHS, the RSPB and Birdlife International, the AWB is the international co-ordinator of all waterfowl counts throughout the Asian Region.

The 27 years have seen many changes in the methods of counts; and also, inevitably, changes in the populations and densities of wintering waterfowl in the region. It is not my purpose now to discuss these changes but there are some interesting points that I have seen during this year's count data and these I would like to briefly discuss here.

First, it is useless to compare figures from year to year. If we go by available data, there is no basis for comparison of grand totals of wintering waterfowl in the state of A.P. Consider Table 1 below:

Year	No. of Sites	No. of Species	Total No. of Birds
2010	8	76	48,027
2011	13	107	2,32,522
2012	16	93	4,07,880
2013	27	113	2,53,917

Table 1

Figures for 2014 have not yet come in, but I am anticipating somewhere around 37 sites, with about 125 species and close to 5,00,000 birds.

Now, if we consider these figures carefully, we will see that the averages per site are steadily increasing from 2010 to 2012 and then suddenly there is a dip in the averages in 2013. This is a fairly normal occurrence in the populations of wintering waterfowl. For no apparent reason there is a sudden dip in numbers one year and then the next year again there are healthy populations. I will come to this point a little later, for there is some food for thought here. In the meantime, the important point to note in the above table is the column for the list of sites. Observe that it is steadily increasing. Between 2012 and 2013, in fact, there is an increase of more than 10, which is more than the total number of sites covered in 2010! This is a trend that I would love to foster, and it seems that it is being so fostered. Till date in 2014, 37 sites have been already covered and some data has not yet come in from some members, so I expect it to be not less than 37-38 sites in total - another phenomenal increase from previous years. The members of the BSAP are to be commended and congratulated for taking this important initiative and giving their time and efforts to this exercise.

Waterfowl have a tough existence. They are far too dependent on extraneous factors for their success. Add to this that most of the migrants make gruelling inter-continental flights during their migration and it is not to be wondered that they lead life on the edge. Added to all this is that several countries through which they pass during their migration may not necessarily have very stringent laws protecting the various species. Migrants are seen normally as outsiders and they are invariably not welcome, except as additions to the menu. Many have the further misfortune of being quite toothsome and they run the gamut of many threats between their summer and winter quarters. The greatest difficulty with these birds is that there are no accurate counts done in the various countries through which they pass during their migrations. It is only now that global counts are emerging, but there is still a long way to go before all the countries in their migration routes come under the same umbrella and start to give the migrants the due regard that they deserve. Happily, we have come a long way and there is considerable interest generated in these birds here and they come under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 just like their resident counterparts and therefore can be termed, at least on paper, to be reasonably safe.

So why do the numbers differ so much? I believe firmly that weather patterns have a role to play in this. I have not yet got any scientific basis to make this statement; it is merely an educated guess based on the patterns I am seeing between previous years and this. I have had the honour to be given the task of compiling and maintaining the database of the annual Waterfowl Counts done by the BSAP members for several years now. I regret that in the years before 2010, most of our figures were maintained on the actual forms and these are not readily retrievable now; though the report on the AWC counts from 1987 to 1997 is a veritable bible of information. It is available on the BSAP website and should, in my opinion, form an addition to the library of all interested persons who want to know what the AWC is and how it helps in wildlife conservation. You can download the paper at http://www.bsap.in/wp-content/uploads/AWBReport.pdf.

To return to the figures, Table 2 below shows some comparatives between the years from 2010 to 2013. I have deliberately selected only those sites which have been covered consistently.

Year	Species	Hussain Sagar	Himayat Sagar	Manjira	Pocharam	Pragati Nagar	Uppalapadu	Upper Manair	Kolleru
2010	76	623	578	2,121	3,263	709	3,427	478	36,873
2011	107	406	341	12,479	200		1,969		1,23,961
2012	93	1,836					3,364		76,431
2013	113	1,602	2,740	1,031	636	3,085	4.082	1,175	67,486

Table 2

As I said, full figures for all the sites for this year (2014) have not yet come in, but there is sufficient evidence to show that the figures are going to be far below the average. Except in a few places, the counts this year have been extremely disappointing in terms of numbers. To take the first example that comes to mind, last year there were close to 9,000 birds in the ICRISAT Campus. This year, the figure has been 2,333! - less than a quarter of the figure from previous years. Against that, the figure this year for Pulicat is almost 4,00,000 birds compared to 1,15,966 in 2013. And this despite the fact that Pulicat was drier than I have ever seen it in many a long day.

I think the reason for this is the unseasonal storms that have battered the coast from October to December 2013. What with the severe cyclones that hit the Southern Coast during this time (Phailin, Helen, Lehar and Madi), they brought with them a major upsurge in the rains in this part of the country. Small ponds and jheels turned into large lakes and morasses of water. The Gandipet Lake for example has an average spread of just under 12 sq. km. This year, the spread was almost 20 sq. km. Areas that, in the previous year, were under cultivation, now were under three feet of water. This, I believe, is the reason for the large decline in bird numbers. But why do I say this: *Because we saw almost the same pattern in 2010*. In 2009 also, there were some massive storms that battered the Andhra Coastal region, starting with Aila in May, followed in November by Phyan and Ward. Interspersed with these were severe depression warnings (BOB 03 and BOB 04). These storms and depressions had exactly the same effect as this year – they caused excessive unnatural rains during November and December, which in turn caused several lakes to spill over with excess water and turned small lakes into inland seas. Consequently, the numbers in 2010 were also seen to be very disappointing, as shown in Table 2 above. However, as I have already said, I have no scientific basis for saying this. I am merely speaking from what little I have been able to see from cursory studies of the figures that have been received thus far in the Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Census exercise.

More information coming in from the members will be of the greatest interest to me. And I would like to close by urging our members to continue to support the success of the AWC counts each year and ensure that in the years to come, we continue to cover outlying sites until we can honestly say that the AWC covers almost all the regions of the state. That indeed would be a real feather in the cap for the BSAP and a mark of our commitment and dedication to the cause of the conservation and preservation of our important wetland habitats!

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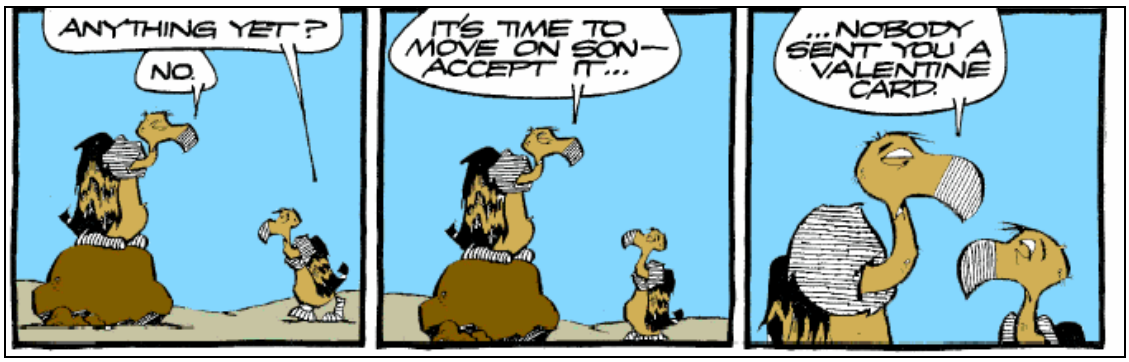
Bird Humour



(From Times of India, 26-09-2012)

Bird of the Month

Text and photos: Umesh Mani

Asian Pied Starling (*Gracupica contra*)

Asian Pied Starling adult (L) and immature (R)
(near Sainikpuri, 11-10-2008 and 15-10-2010 respectively)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Sturnidae
Genus: *Gracupica (earlier Sturnus)*
Species: *G. contra*
Size: 23 cm

Description &distribution: The Asian Pied Starling, also known as the Pied Myna, is a striking species of starling found in the Indian sub-continent and South-east Asia. It is distinctively coloured in black and white, and has a yellowish bill with a reddish base. Its upperparts (including the head), neck, throat and breast are black whereas a sharp contrast is seen in the white cheeks, lores and wing coverts. The rump is also white, and it has a bare patch of reddish skin around the eyes. The sexes are similar, but immature birds show brown instead of the black. Leucistic individuals have been noted.

Five sub-species are described, which show slight differences in their plumage, streaking and measurements. The nominate race, *G. c. contra*, was described by Linnaeus in 1758 and is seen mainly along the Gangetic plains and extending east to Bangladesh and south to Andhra Pradesh. *G. c. superciliaris,* seen in Manipur and south to Myanmar and east to Yunnan, has the white extending over the eye and was first described by Edward Blyth in 1863. *G. c. sordida,* described by Sidney Dillon Ripley in 1950, is seen in parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, and has reduced streaking on shoulders and nape. The other 2 races are *G. c. floweri,* seen in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, and *G. c. jalla,* seen in Sumatra, Java and Bali.

The general habitat consists of lowland open areas, like plains and foothills (up to around 700m), having scattered trees and with access to open water. They are also seen near human habitation, and at sewage or garbage disposal points.

Behaviour: The Asian Pied Starling is usually seen in small groups. It forages on the ground, but perches on trees, buildings or other structures. Foraging activity takes place on fields, grasslands (including lawns), and on open ground; it may also occur alongside grazing cattle. The diet includes grain, fruit, insects, earthworms or molluscs, usually taken from the ground. The bird uses a gaping action while foraging, pushing its bill into the soil, then opening the bill to dislodge hidden food in the soil. The eyes are so positioned that it can see the space between the parted mandibles. Birds form communal roosts at night, and may jointly defend feeding and nesting areas.

Birds in a group call to each other with a variety of sounds including whistles, buzzes, clicks, trills and warbling calls. Young birds in captivity can learn to imitate tunes of other birds.

During breeding season, flock size decreases. Birds pair up and indulge in courtship rituals, which may include calling, fluffing up of feathers and bobbing of the head.

Nesting: The breeding season is between March and September. The nest is a loose mass of straw, formed into a dome with a side entrance, and usually placed on large trees (like mango, banyan, etc) or, sometimes, on manmade structures like recesses in buildings, lamp-post fittings, etc. Several pairs may breed in proximity. The clutch consists of 4-6 glossy blue eggs, which are laid with up to a day's gap in between. Incubation begins midway through the process, and the subsequent feeding duties are carried out by both parents.

Local name: The Asian Pied Starling is known as *'ablak'* or *'ablaki myna'* in Hindi, *'venda gorinka'* or *'batta gorinka'* in Telugu and *'bharat shabal saarika'* in Sanskrit.

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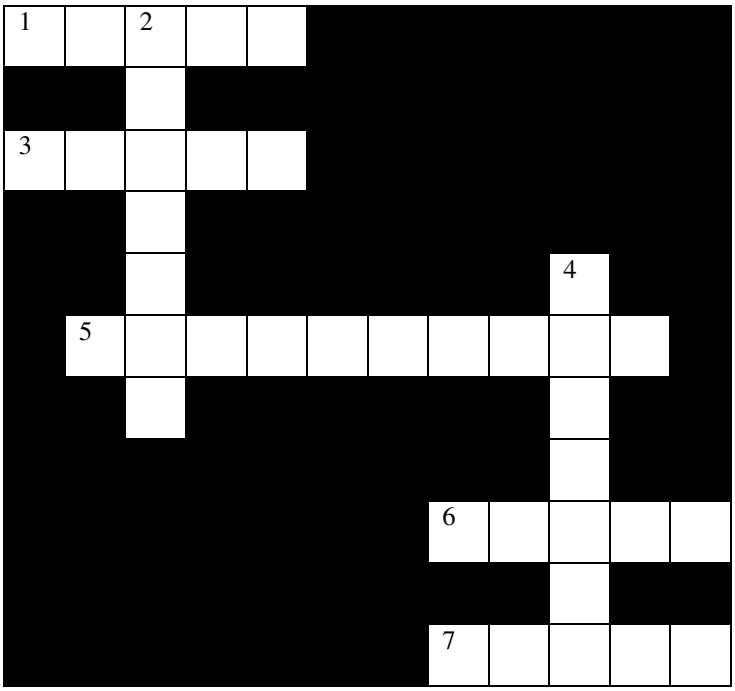
BIRDING CROSSWORD #25

Umesh Mani

The answers to the clues given below are bird names or other birding-related terms. Let's see how many you can find!
(*Solutions in next month's Pitta*)



ACROSS

1 - Pi occupies part of the theatre with this bird (5)

3 - This high-altitude bird is almost normal? Not right! (5)

5 - Avians hop around to make pictures? (4,6)

6 - Stretch your neck to see this bird (5)

7 - Dewar arranges to locate this type of waterbird (5)

DOWN

2 - Half the guides in Pennsylvania can't fly! (7)

4 - No Rupee, only Paise finds this bird in the orchard! (7)

Solutions to Crossword #24 (Pitta, January 2014)
ACROSS: 1 – STOOP, 4 - GADWALL, 5 - NORTHERN PINTAILS, 6 – OWLETS, 7 - ROOK
DOWN: 2- PIED HARRIER, 3 – PAINTED STORK

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